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ABSTRACT

A study examined individual student, institutional, and environmental factors influencing student non-completions and determined strategies that Western Australia's Central TAFE (technical and further education) might introduce to improve student retention. After completing a multivariate analysis of module completion rates, further data for a qualitative analysis were gathered using eight focus groups, 15 individual telephone interviews, and a self-completion survey. Focus group discussions indicated the primary reason for participants' withdrawal was declining personal motivation and lessened commitment to class attendance and completion of course of study. Younger participants were affected by the gap between expectations and reality of attending the course and a lack of clarity in terms of personal goals. Part-time participants were dissatisfied with their course of study, content, and way it was taught. Withdrawing students named these major reasons for withdrawing: changed career plans; acceptance at an alternative training provider; full-time employment; no time to study; and difficulty with the workload. Suggested strategies to apply to at-risk students and courses were improved pre-enrollment information; selection interviews; comprehensive student orientation program; processes to follow up on students who withdraw; contact students who miss a specific number of classes; provide students with notes from missed classes; and referral. (YLB)

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Improving completion rates for TAFE students

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Overview

In recent years there has been a shift in policy by national and state governments from an activity-based reporting system to an output-based reporting system. To the vocational education and training (VET) sector this has meant the identification of a number of key performance measures relating to efficiency, effectiveness and quality. These measures are collected by the states and reported to the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) on an annual basis.

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These measures include:

- Participation rates
- Graduate destination
- Employer satisfaction
- Actual and planned student load
- Module load completion rate
- Unit costs.

One key performance measure - module load completion rate (MLCR) - is of particular interest to technical and further education (TAFE) colleges because in some states this indicator is linked to funding. The MLCR is the proportion of hours of delivery which result in a successful module completion. It is used as a surrogate measure of output efficiency.

MLCR or its variant MLOR[1] is a business compliance indicator under Central TAFE's resource agreement with the Western Australian Department of Training and Employment. MLOR is linked to funding, and TAFE colleges in Western Australia have specific MLOR targets to achieve. Failure to meet these targets results in a refund to the department. It is therefore critical for Central TAFE to gain an understanding of the factors affecting student outcomes and explore possible strategies that will assist in increasing student completion rates not just for the College, but also for the students themselves.

To better understand the factors that affect MLCR, the Research Unit at Central TAFE subcontracted the statistical expertise at the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER). Using AVETMISS data, NCVER conducted a multivariate analysis of Central TAFE module load completion rates (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2000) to determine what factors affected MLCR at Central TAFE and which of these factors were of greater importance.

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Summary of multivariate analysis

In order to make the analysis more accessible, the factors which might predict completion rates of students were broadly identified as falling into three groups. These were:

- Student factors (for example, age, gender of student, country of origin, mode of participation, highest prior education, length of time since leaving school, first time VET, place of residence, socioeconomic level etc).

- College and delivery factors (for example, college size, college location, teacher-directed or self-paced or other delivery mode, number of students enrolled in module).

- Course and program factors (for example, AQF course level and ANTA group, length of module).

Results - single factors and pairs of factors

At the simplest level, very low values of MLCR were associated with:

- Indigenous students; and

- Students undertaking adult literacy and English as a second language (ESL) courses.

This result was supported by a similar study of all Western Australian TAFE Colleges also conducted by NCVER in 1999.[2]

The analysis also found lower values of MLCR for:

- Younger students and males - gender and age have a joint effect;

- Students whose highest education level is year 11 or lower, or is unknown;

- Students studying part-time or as trainees;

- Students with missing demographic information - a finding which should not be treated as a trivial one. Missing data precluded a consideration of the effects of main language spoken at home and country of birth for Central College;

- School leavers, students still at school and students undertaking VET for the first time;

- Students undertaking modules in self-paced or correspondence delivery modes; and

- Students undertaking longer courses with many modules, and modules with a large number of enrolments at the campus (these effects are weaker but still observable).

The data also highlighted that a large number of students completed less than 5% of the module hours in which they enrolled. These students comprised about 21% of the total in the study group. (Just over 40% of the students completed more than 95% of the hours undertaken.)

For the students who successfully completed less than 5% of the hours undertaken in the study group, the following characteristics were noted:

- They are more likely to be starting VET for the first time;
- They are more likely to be studying part-time or as trainees;
- They are more likely to have unknown demographic data;
- They are more likely to be young males.

Results of classification and regression tree (CART) analyses

A much more sophisticated series of investigations were carried out to attempt to discover more complete patterns of explanation and to rank factors in order of importance. The investigation showed that:

- Highest education level (ranging from year 9 or lower to degree or higher) is the most important factor, followed by mode of participation (apprentice, trainee, full-time and part-time);
- Course level and industry group are generally of medium importance as predictors;
- Other factors (gender, delivery mode, module length, year started in VET) also predicted low module completion.

The overall conclusion is that student factors are slightly more important than program or delivery factors, with:

- Full-time students and apprentices (the latter a very small group at Central College) having a positive effect on MLCR; and
- Part-time students and those with highest education level of year 9 or lower or unknown (particularly the latter) having a negative effect on MLCR.

The purpose of the current research is to build on these findings and examine more closely the individual student, institutional and environmental factors influencing student non-completions and to determine what strategies Central TAFE might introduce in order to improve student retention.

Improving student retention at central TAFE

Research approach

The multivariate analysis found that, although Central TAFE had an overall module completion rate of 72%, very few students (approximately 11% of students) actually achieved this. The College rate of 72% was a function of averaging, with just over 40% of students completing more than 95% of the hours in which they enrolled and 21% completing less than 5% of the hours in which they enrolled (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2000, p 3). Consequently, in order to fully understand the factors which might predict student non-completions, the current research focused on the characteristics of students with very low individual module load completion rates. A sample of students who had completed less than 5% of the module hours in which they enrolled in semester 1 of 2000 were selected and qualitative research was undertaken using a combination of focus groups and in-depth telephone interviews. The various focus groups were stratified according to gender, age, mode of participation and highest level of secondary qualification. Students who were from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds were interviewed individually via telephone.

Eight focus groups were conducted with between 8 and 10 participants. A further 15 individual telephone interviews were conducted.

Simultaneous to this, a self-completion survey was sent to all students enrolled in semester II at Central TAFE who formally withdrew. A total of 338 surveys were issued and 103 student surveys were returned, netting a response rate of 30%. An analysis of the results of this survey is included in this report.

The research questions

What other factors affect MLCR?
Which of these factors are of greater importance?
What strategies can Central TAFE implement to increase the retention rates of students?

In 2000 the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs commissioned a comprehensive literature review on non-completions in VET and higher education (HE) (McInnis et al 2000).[3] The authors found that there were relatively clear themes emerging from the literature about the reasons why students discontinue their studies. The authors also noted that there is rarely any single factor or event which will result in a student discontinuing her/his course of study, but more often a combination of reasons will lead to this decision. These reasons are categorised as:

- problems with employment;
- problems with the course;
- health and chance events;
- institutional factors;
- financial problems; and
- family and other commitments.

Focus group questions, telephone interview questions and survey items were developed around these themes.

Key findings of the focus group sessions and telephone interviews

The basic structure of focus group questions were to: firstly, understand why students chose Central TAFE and the specific course undertaken; and secondly, to discuss each potential reason for discontinuation and how it may or may not have impacted on their final decision to discontinue their studies.

To maintain consistency, similar sets of questions were asked of participants in the in-depth interviews and participants' responses were recorded verbatim, wherever possible, by the author during the interview.

Choice of institution and course

The literature review by McInnis et al (2000) identified a number of studies on student non-completion that indicated an association between non-completion or withdrawal and doubt about career choice.

The primary reasons why focus group participants had chosen to study at Central TAFE were related to distance and course availability. Several participants indicated that Central TAFE was the only college that offered the specific course they wished to enrol in. The extent to which students investigated the content and suitability of their course varied. Younger participants, particularly young men, selected the course by its name alone, whereas older participants undertook more advanced decision-making processes. This is consistent with findings by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991), who suggest that there is a clear relationship between age and more advanced level of career decision making. (Note that the selection of the course is strongly correlated with career choice.)

Clearly for some participants, poor course selection and inappropriate reasons for choosing to study at Central TAFE influenced their final decision to withdraw. For these participants, the contrast between their expectations of Central TAFE and their course of study, and the reality they experienced during their first few weeks of attendance, was such that they decided to drop out. Typical responses included:

> I wanted to be a builder so I did Building Studies that was really for guys who wanted to register as a builder, but I didn't know that, no-one told me.
>
> My career adviser at school said I would be good at Conveyancing, it was really boring not what I thought at all, so I dropped out. (young female)

Course-specific issues (quality of teaching experience, choice of study, relevance of program for career plans, work load, academic progress, expectations not met)

Yorke (1999), in his study of undergraduate non-completions in higher education in England, noted that the impact of a poor quality student experience was a key feature of decisions to discontinue studying. The second series of questions revolved around these issues: quality of teaching experience, choice of study, academic progress, course content etc.

The quality of teaching is of particular concern to Central TAFE and an obvious area in which to focus for improvement.

Overall there was a clear distinction between the expectations that younger and older participants had of their specific course of study at Central TAFE. Generally younger participants were more likely to be critical of their lecturers' preparedness for classes. Older participants tended to be critical of their lecturers' style of teaching and the way in which their course was delivered. The participants' feedback overall indicated that there is a large variation in the quality of interaction participants had with lecturers and other staff.

Participants who had been attending a course of study part-time, at Central TAFE, were more likely to be critical of the supportiveness of staff other than their lecturers. It is interesting to note that no other participants specifically commented on staff other than their lecturers, in a negative or positive sense. It seems part-time students were more likely than full-time students to notice the lack of support by staff other than lecturing staff.

Generally, participants perceived the amount of work in their course of study as acceptable. More participants had problems with the course content not living up to their expectations or being more difficult than they originally thought it would be. Those participants who found the course workload did not meet their expectations, in terms of the amount and content of the course work, were more likely to be in the younger age categories and/or from a CALD background.

Participants studying part-time were particularly critical of the speed in which the work was covered for each class. They perceived they were not getting quality time with their lecturers and value for money from the course when compared to students studying a full-time load.

> Once a week was not enough time. We had a lot to do in the time. Need to give more time to do learning, class time goes by quickly. [Accounting]

> Yes [more than expected], the out of class workload definitely. It was too fast, lots to cover in each class. [Multimedia]

Impact of personal issues (health, financial, family commitments)

The literature review (McInnis et al 2000) indicates that separating personal issues out from other issues can be misleading, as it is unusual for students to cite only one reason for their discontinuation, and it is often difficult to determine where institutional responsibility lies. McInnis and associates use the following example to demonstrate this;

> making the wrong course choices may be attributed to the poor quality of information provided to prospective students, or lack of career counselling. On the other hand, students can simply ignore expert advice ... (p 33)

The next series of questions in the focus groups served to explore personal issues associated with health, peer influence, family/work commitments and financial issues.

From the focus groups it became clear that personal issues influenced students' ability and motivation to continue studying.

For most participants, family and friends were a minor distraction and more of a support than a burden. However, for younger participants, particularly young men, friends and even peers from their course of study had a negative impact on their attendance. The following comments, all made by younger participants, illustrate this point.

> I had 15 friends all doing a different class. I had a 4 hour break but they had a 2 hour, and I would drag them to the pub.
>
> My family was supportive but my friends were always saying skip class, see a movie. We were all studying the same course.
>
> I'm 17, obviously I would rather have fun than study, I wasn't going to say no.

A few participants also admitted that family commitments had impacted on their ability to focus on their course of study. This was particularly the case with part-time and older participants. They commented:

> You would work all day, have the course happening and you need to spend time with it, and you have other commitments like sport and your family. You are just running out of time and need 20 more hours a week to make that happen.

The next series of questions related to participants' financial circumstances and work commitments. Responses here varied considerably, and it become clear that different participants had different socioeconomic backgrounds. Most younger participants did not work while they were studying and received assistance from the government and/or their families. The following comments made by younger participants illustrate this.

> It's hard for people who are independent and don't live at home and have to support themselves. The only way you can get through it is if your parents pay for it or if the government funds you but it's still not enough.

Overall, it seemed older participants, and/or those enrolled part-time in their course of study, were more likely to drop their studies due to financial strain, work commitments or both.

The most common concern for participants with regard to finances was the lack of information about additional materials required for their course of study and the cost of purchasing these. Some participants did not feel the cost of the course was particularly high but they did have some reservations about where their fees went, as they had experienced situations where equipment and materials were lacking. Participants indicated that they wanted to know the full cost of their course up front.

The majority of participants worked in some capacity. Of these participants, those working in full-time positions were more likely to have their work commitments clash with their study commitments. Further, some participants from CALD

backgrounds indicated they worked long hours prior to attending their classes. The following comments made by these participants demonstrated this.

> I had two jobs then. One early in morning and then another job after. Sometimes I had 13 hours a day. It was very tiring and sometimes it was hard to work in class.

Participants with children were more likely to choose their work over study, as obviously they needed to financially support their family. Interestingly, most working participants had not informed their employer about their studies at Central TAFE.

Few working participants were in professions or jobs that were directly related to their studies. In fact, most working participants had jobs which were not at all related to their Central TAFE studies, and their reasons for doing the course of study was to change their career.

Institutional factors (student services, campus environment)

Work by Anderson (1999) highlights the role performed by student services in facilitating and enhancing student participation and retention in TAFE programs. Although Anderson also makes it clear that there is no single 'client perspective' on student services and amenities, it is interesting to examine the impact these services had on the participants in the focus groups.

Information gathered relating to satisfaction with the student services overall was limited. Several participants acknowledged that they had not been at Central TAFE long enough to comment on the overall student services. Others indicated they felt all their needs were taken into account. Of the few participants who could provide some feedback, this is typical of the comments.

> It seems like there's far too many people crammed into classrooms, I would have been struggling to find a seat. I think there's about two and a half times the number there should be in each class. But they said it would have been okay the next semester because it would go down because people drop out.

In terms of involvement in 'student life', this was very much a full-time student issue. Participants who had been enrolled part time did not expect or even want to be involved in the student life on campus, but simply attended their classes and went home again.

From the general discussion on Central TAFE's physical surroundings, the focus moved on to orientating oneself around the campus. Once again, there was a mixed reaction in relation to finding classrooms and service facilities at Central TAFE campuses.

Orientation students to the College campus was a rare event for participants, with only a very few students either aware of or participating in an orientation program. Whilst this issue wasn't critical to students, full-time students indicated that it would be a useful exercise and assist with 'connecting' with the campus and college and alleviate considerable frustration at having to ask for help from staff and students.

Participants were also asked whether they thought about seeking advice from a lecturer/administrative staff member or student counsellor when they were considering discontinuing their course. Young females were not averse to talking to someone; many thought it would have been a good idea. Young male participants never considered seeking advice. They just left.

> [Hesitantly] It didn't really cost me that much to walk away. (young male)

> Yes, that would have been good. A lot of them [young students] were tossing and turning about what they should do with their lives, they could use those services. (Older female)

Telephone interview participants were more candid in their responses and made the following comments.

> No, I didn't know who to go to. I didn't feel comfortable with them [lecturers]. (CALD female)

> No, I didn't. I just think about it myself. Can I do it, if I work during the daytime? Forget it! I don't pick up the book, hard to find the time to study and with class only once a week I forget. When I work all day I am so tired and it is very difficult to adjust time, you know? (CALD male)

Factors influencing final decision to withdraw

Participants were asked individually to rank the importance of the specific issues discussed in the focus groups regarding their final reason for withdrawal. Participants rated the variables on a scale of 1-10, where 1 was the greatest influence and 10 the least influence.

(It should be noted that the sample size is small (n=83) and therefore only indicative.)

- Over a quarter (29%) of participants rated 'lack of motivation' as '1' and overall this was the variable considered to be of highest importance when compared to the ratings for other variables. Motivation was influenced by other factors which are listed below.

- 'Course content' (26%) and 'financial circumstances' (19%) were the next highest.

- The variable which overall received a rating of the lowest importance was 'TAFE Campus environment'.

It appears from the focus group discussions that the primary reason for participants' withdrawal from Central TAFE was declining personal motivation and lessened commitment to class attendance and to completing their course of study. The factors that influenced personal motivation varied considerably between participants.

In general, younger participants were affected by the gap between their expectations and the reality of attending the course as well as a lack of clarity in terms of their personal goals. For participants from a CALD background, factors such as work commitments and/or financial strain lead to their final withdrawal. These participants also had unclear goals.

Further, a few participants from CALD backgrounds could not keep up with their course of study as they found the language hard to grasp and they quickly fell behind.

Finally, part-time participants commonly commented on their dissatisfaction with their course of study, the content and way it was taught. However, of all the subgroups in the research project, part-time participants were the most varied in relation to their final reasons for withdrawing from Central TAFE.

To complete the focus group session, students were asked about how they indicated to the College they had withdrawn. These series of questions would assist the College in determining the warning signs for which it should be alert, in order to initiate intervention strategies.

The type of withdrawal participants underwent were equally divided into informal and formal withdrawal. That is, some participants had just stopped going to their classes, whilst others officially withdrew as soon as they had decided. Others had stopped going for quite some time and had then decided to complete the withdrawal forms. The following comments illustrate the types of withdrawal participants made from Central TAFE.

> I spoke to someone they said if you're not happy and can't keep up then you have to repeat. With that attitude I left.
>
> I started skipping classes and thought I may as well withdraw to get my money back.
>
> I consciously withdrew, kept thinking of going back part-time but I forgot to re-enrol. I just decided, oh well. I wasn't passing anyway so I figured I may as well not re-enrol.
>
> Yeah, I went in and asked what to do. They said 'fill this out' and then gave me half my money back.
>
> No I just didn't turn up. I hope I didn't cause any problems.
>
> I stopped going and then filled in a form eventually.
>
> Just stopped going. Well I had missed a few so it became easier to just keep missing them.
>
> I was thinking about it for about a week. Then I went and filled in the forms.
>
> At the beginning I just stopped but then I went in to withdraw, to make it official.

The majority of participants still had plans to study again at some point in the near future and many of the younger participants had actually enrolled in another course. Those participants who were now working full-time acknowledged that they may continue studying. Participants clearly specified they would use the benefit of hindsight if they did go back, making sure they were more proactive about their studies and how it would fit into their everyday lives. Several younger participants acknowledged they would be more mature when they studied next time and they

would have clearer objectives in mind. For a couple of young participants, their experience at Central TAFE had made them realise they required more secondary school education or that they would prefer to study at university.

Key findings of the survey of withdrawing students

The focus group and telephone interviews focused on the specific sample of students who had poor module completion rates – ie completed less than 5% of the modules in which they had enrolled in semester 1, 2000. It was also decided to examine the reasons for students' formal withdrawal in semester 2 as a comparison. A self-completion questionnaire was sent to students within one week of formally withdrawing from their course of study. 383 students formally withdrew from Central TAFE during semester 2, 2000. All of these former students were sent the self-completion questionnaire/survey. A total of 103 surveys were returned, with a response rate of 26%.

The survey comprised of a series of statements around these key themes:

- choice of study and career plans
- the teaching experience, content and workload
- equipment and facilities
- student services
- finances
- health, transport difficulties.

Withdrawing students were asked to rate each statement on a scale of 1-3, to indicate the extent to which the statement reflected their reasons for leaving. A rating of 1 indicated that the statement was not a reason for withdrawing, and a rating of 3 was a major reason for withdrawing.

Students also had the opportunity to identify the single most important reason why they had withdrawn. This component of the survey provided the most insight. All but two respondents answered this question.

Demographics of students who withdrew

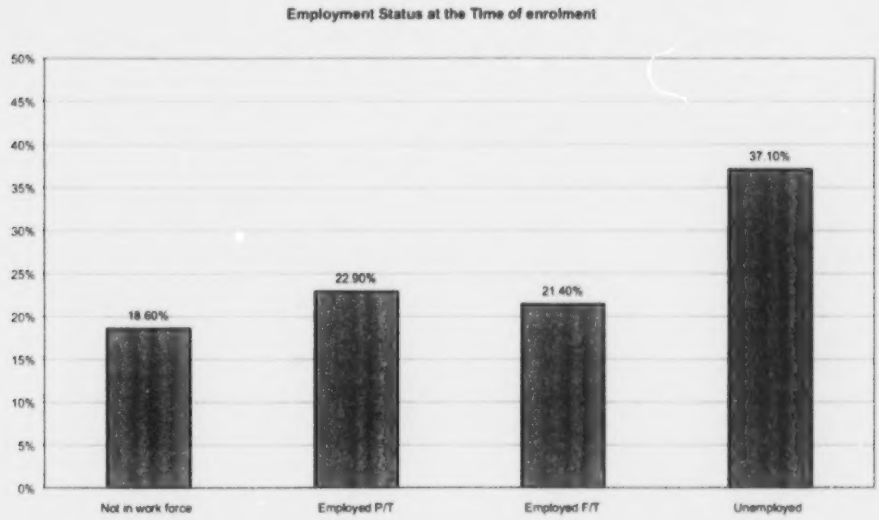
Gender
Female - 59% Male - 41%

Age
There was a relatively even spread across the age groups between 15 and 50.

Enrolment status
Full-time - 30% Part-time - 61.6% External - 5.7%

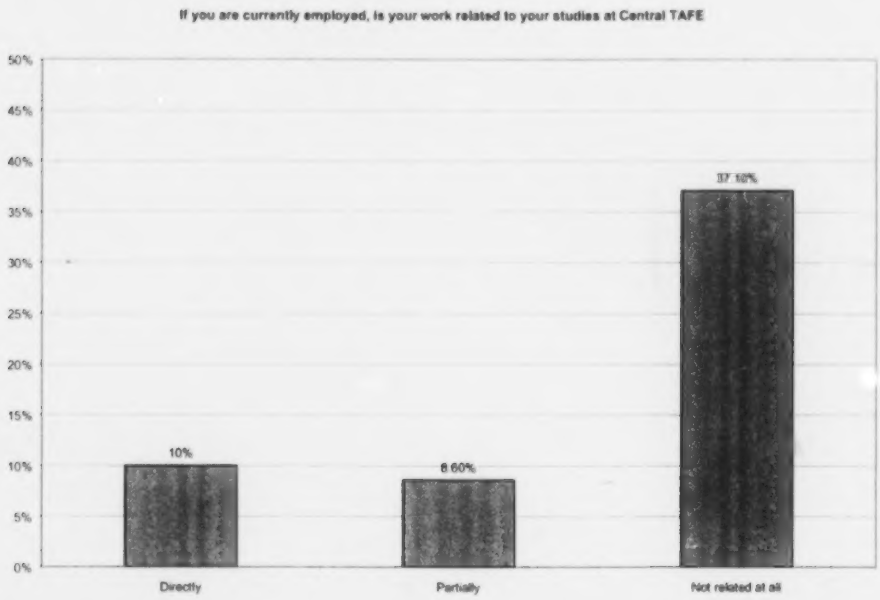
Year of enrolment
87% of students were in their first year and 68.6% of students were in their first semester.

Figure 1: Employment status at time of enrolment



A large proportion of the withdrawing students were unemployed. The majority of these students where in the age group 40 and over. In this age group, 54% of respondents were unemployed, and in the 35-39 age group, 45.5% of respondents were unemployed. The 15-19 age group also had high levels of unemployment (45.8%).

Figure 2: Relationship of area of employment to area of studies



Of those respondents who indicated that they were employed, a high proportion were working in industries not related to their course of study. This was further broken down by age. As expected, the highest proportion of these were in the 15-19 age group (75%). It is reasonable to expect that this age group would be working in either the retail or hospitality industry on a casual basis. However, the age groups 25-29 and 30-35 also had a high proportion of respondents who worked in areas totally unrelated to their studies. This would indicate that they were changing careers.

The major reasons for withdrawing

The following statements received a rating of 'a major reason for withdrawing' by respondents:

- My career plans have changed since I enrolled in the course (course did not live up to my expectations) (18.8%)
- I accepted a place at an alternative training provider (17.2%)
- I accepted a full-time job (15.6%)
- I could not find time to study (11.3%)

- I had difficulty with the workload (11.1%).

The main reasons by age and mode of study

To provide a more meaningful analysis, the data was extracted by age and mode of study. Alternative data extraction using other 'at risk' characteristics was not possible because of the small sample sizes. For example, males made up 41% of the number of students who formally withdrew, however, only a small proportion (24%) of these males completed the survey.

Full-time students age 15-24 (25% of respondents)

The following statements were rated by respondents in this category as the 'major reason' for withdrawal:

- My career plans have changed since I enrolled in the course (course did not live up to my expectations) (33.3%)
- I was bored with my class (delivery and content was not made interesting) (33.3%)
- I accepted a place at an alternative institution (23.8%).

Full-time students age < 25 (14% of respondents)

The following statements were rated by respondents in this category as the 'major reason' for withdrawal:

- I was enrolled in more hours than I could handle (27.3%)
- I ran out of money and had to work more hours (18.2%)
- The adjustment of studying at Central TAFE was more difficult than I expected (18.2%).

Part-time students age 15-24 (15% of respondents)

The following statements were rated by respondents in this category as the 'major reason' for withdrawal:

- I needed a break from study (36.4%)
- I accepted a place at an alternative institution (23.8%)
- My career plans have changed since I enrolled in the course (course did not live up to my expectations) (18.2%).

Part-time students age < 25 (46% of respondents)

The following statements were rated by respondents in this category as the 'major reason' for withdrawal:

- My career plans have changed since I enrolled in the course (course did not live up to my expectations) (19.4%)
- I accepted a full-time job (16.7%)
- I couldn't fit in the study (14.3%)
- I needed a course which offered more flexible ways of learning (13.9%)
- I had difficulty keeping up with the workload (11.1%).

Comments from respondents varied considerably. Younger full-time respondents were in two camps: those who were unsure about 'what they wanted to do' and were bored with classes; and those that wanted to attend an alternative institution. The alternative institution was generally university and not TAFE.

Full-time respondents over 25 years of age generally did not live with their family, therefore issues such as financial hardship and health factors featured strongly in their comments. Other issues such as poor study habits were mentioned. Comments like 'unprepared for the learning battle' summed up the verbatim comments.

Interestingly enough a number of the respondents in the part-time 15-24 age group were also studying at university and found the combined workload was too great. The remainder were finishing off modules they had missed or had withdrawn from previously.

Part-time older respondents had the most varied responses, including: workload, issues with the quality of the teaching experience, inflexibility of the course, poor access to resources to assist with study, not enough information prior to enrolment, and cost of books and materials.

It would appear from the responses to the survey, the focus groups and the telephone interview that the reasons for non-completion are fairly consistent, and therefore strategies to improve student retention would have wide appeal.

Conclusion

Student non-completion at Central TAFE is an issue for the College in terms of student perceptions of Central TAFE as well as from a funding perspective. In the broader Perth marketplace, which includes Central TAFE, reputation and word of mouth influence institutional choice. Negative experiences at Central TAFE which influence students to withdraw from their course of study need to be addressed as a matter of priority.

Since the introduction of the Western Australian Vocational Education and Training Act (1996) (which effectively gave the TAFE colleges autonomy), Central TAFE has embarked on an aggressive marketing campaign to clearly differentiate itself from other TAFE colleges in the marketplace. This campaign has been successful in consistently achieving enrolment targets, particularly in the latter years. However, now the issue of how to retain students is of prime concern. It may even be that Central TAFE's marketing has been too successful and is attracting a market segment of people who are not committed to fulfilling the final goal of completing their course of study or who are unsure about what their aims/goals might be.

Based on the findings of this research project and the available literature, individual motivation or commitment was found to be the primary influence for students withdrawing from their course of study. Further, the findings suggest that an individual's motivation can be influenced by a number of factors. Central TAFE can provide assistance to positively influence student outcomes.

From an institutional or course point of view, it is inevitable that some students will not finish a course of study, for a wide range of possible reasons. Nevertheless, it is the responsibility of an institution to attempt keep non-completion to a minimum.

McInnis et al (2000) dedicate a chapter on reviewing a range of strategies in use to assist both higher education and VET to reduce the number of non-completions. However, they also point out that there has been very little independent and systematic evaluative research undertaken to assess the relative effectiveness of these strategies.

Evidence presented in the literature suggests that the most effective strategies to reduce attrition should be aimed at the recruitment and transition stages. This is not to say that strategies that increase the quality of content and delivery should be neglected. Processes that support the ongoing review of the quality of the learning experience are beneficial for all students.
Based on the research to date on non-completions, the following are suggested strategies that Central TAFE could apply to both *at risk* students and *at risk* courses (at risk courses are those which fail to meet the module completion targets).

- Improve pre-enrolment information to prospective students, which specifically covers:
    - detailed content
    - all fees and charges
    - timetable commitments
    - the number of hours it would take to complete the course
    - assessment requirements
    - mode of delivery
    - career outcomes and prospects
    - option of pre-course counselling with a career counsellor.

- Conduct selection interviews, particularly in course areas where the number of non-completions is high - eg engineering;

- A comprehensive induction (orientation) program for students, which includes an introduction to the College facilities and services as well as the teaching area. It can also include peer group support or a mentoring program;
- A process whereby students who withdraw or leave are followed up with either a telephone interview or a survey (as has been the case with this research);
- A process whereby students who miss a specific number of classes are contacted;
- A process whereby students who miss classes can obtain class lecture notes;
- A transition program for full-time school leavers commencing study at Central TAFE for the first time (this would be of particular benefit for young men); and
- A process of referral to professional help/assistance for students in difficulty.

It is also recommended that in the event that Central TAFE or any other TAFE institute adopts any of the various strategies suggested, a comprehensive review of the strategy be undertaken to ensure that it remains relevant over time. As both this research and the literature has indicated there is never any one reason for withdrawal and as student demographics, program and institute variables change over time, so will the strategies to address student non-completion.

Notes

1. Module Load Output Rate (MLOR) is a variant of MLCR and is used for funding-related purposes only. The formula is identical, except MLOR includes an adjustment of Invalid Module Enrolment and includes employment outcomes, but does not include students with a disability.

2. Multivariate analysis of Western Australian Department of Training module load completion rates by the National Centre for Vocation Education Research (1999).

3. The report by McInnis et al (2000) is a very comprehensive literature review of non-completions in both the VET and HE sectors. No attempt to replicate their work has been made, so readers are referred to this report for further background reading.

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